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LEE KUAN YEW AN ANALYSIS OF HIS NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND  
STATECRAFT

CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY

CDR James F. Duffy, JAGC, USN, Class of 96

Foundations of National Security Strategy

Seminar M

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## INTRODUCTION

As Prime Minister of Singapore from her independence in 1965 to 1990, Lee Kuan Yew carefully crafted a national security strategy that led his country from poverty to plenty. Upon her expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia, Singapore was on an economic par with Chile, Argentina, and Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Today, Singapore's per capita gross national product (GNP) is four to five times that of those countries.<sup>2</sup> It has surpassed Great Britain, its colonizer, in per capita GNP, become the world's busiest port and third-largest oil refiner, and developed into a global center for manufacturing and service industries.<sup>3</sup> Lee's shrewd ability to read Singapore's domestic and international environment and to implement strategies to take advantage of available opportunities was instrumental in moving Singapore from the ranks of the developing nations into an affluent society in one generation.

Although he has repeatedly rebuffed the title of "enlightened dictator," Lee had virtually total control over the government and guided this miraculous transformation in an authoritarian manner. He was relentless in achieving his goals of establishing a national identity, developing an internationally competitive economy, and molding his people into a properly ordered and ambitious society. By successfully accomplishing these objectives, Singaporeans were brought together as a viable and prosperous nation. Lee's national security strategy, however, did have its negative costs. In particular, freedom of expression and other individual liberties were often subjugated to the advancement of national interests.

This paper will analyze how Lee developed and implemented a military, economic, and social strategy to elevate his country to international prominence. It argues that Lee accomplished his goals by pragmatically employing coalitions and promoting regional cooperation in his defense strategy, directing a government-driven mercantilism in his economic strategy, and applying utilitarianism in his social strategy. In each of these strategies, he carefully devised, developed, and implemented policies to advance Singapore's national interests.

## MILITARY STRATEGY

Since her expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore has been extremely fortunate that she has not encountered any significant threats to her existence. Her physical security, nevertheless, was a vital interest that needed to be addressed. As a small island located in a strategic international strait, Singapore was in an extremely vulnerable position. She was dwarfed by the military power of her neighbors. At the time of her independence, Singapore did not possess a navy or air force. Her ground forces merely consisted of a volunteer artillery regiment, an armored car squadron, and a regular infantry of less than three battalions.<sup>4</sup> Such a small force could not by itself provide adequate protection against any sizable adversary. A defense strategy was required that would provide protection at a reasonable cost. Lee quickly recognized that the best means to reduce Singapore's vulnerability was through a three pronged approach of persuading friendly big powers to protect her integrity, developing a large national reserve force, and promoting regional cooperation. This pragmatic approach would prove to be both inexpensive and effective.

Singapore initially relied on British forces stationed on the island pursuant to the Anglo-Malaysian defense agreement for her protection. This arrangement was adequate while it lasted. In 1968, however, the British feeling the strain of a depressed economy and the drain of a three year confrontation with Indonesia, which involved over 50,000 troops, announced their intention to evacuate the Singapore bases by the Spring of 1971.<sup>5</sup> This departure not only posed a serious threat to Singapore's physical security, but also jeopardized her economic growth by frightening away foreign investment. To offset the withdrawal of British forces, Lee sought protection through coalition support. In April 1971, Singapore signed the Five Power Defense Agreement with Britain, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> Although this agreement did not contain a definite defense commitment, it did provide a visible mechanism for calling on big power support in a crisis. As a result of this agreement, Australian, New Zealand, and British forces were stationed in Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

Since relying solely on foreign powers for protection is inherently dangerous, Lee realized that a viable internal military force had to be developed. Having observed Israel's success in overcoming immensely

larger enemies in war, Lee looked to the Israeli military system as a model. In 1967, legislation was passed to require all eighteen year old males to serve a period of national military service, after which they were placed into the reserves.<sup>8</sup> Such universal military service was designed not only to create a large defense force at minimal costs, but also had the added benefit of engendering a sense of national identity. Relying primarily on a large reserve force for the nation's defense, moreover, had the advantage of presenting a minimal threat to her neighbors.

To further counteract her military weakness, Lee also recognized the value of building regional cooperation. By establishing friendly ties and developing economic trading relationships with her neighbors, Singapore would increase her stability and reduce vulnerability. Indonesia, who was viewed as a natural leader of the region, was a major concern. Even at the risk of alienating Malaysia, Lee revived trade with Indonesia in 1966. He also made visits to Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta in an effort to build trust and confidence. This spirit of regional cooperation led to the establishment in 1967 of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which included Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines as its founding members, and its support for the designation of Southeast Asia in 1972 as 'zone of peace, freedom and neutrality'.<sup>9</sup> In putting her neighborhood in order, Singapore was able to concentrate on other critical domestic issues.

When speaking on defense issues, Lee has expressed idealistic views. He has promoted the value of international law and international organizations.<sup>10</sup> In a 1994 interview, Lee advocated the use of the United Nations as an instrument for resolving international conflicts.<sup>11</sup> Considering Singapore's small size and limited military potential, his idealistic perspective on defense matters is quite understandable. Lee realized that economic power would be the means by which Singapore would exert influence on her neighbors and the world. An attempt to develop Singapore into a regional military power would have been counterproductive.

Lee's three pronged approach to military security was practical and effective. His programs were a well-balanced means of providing for the nation's physical security. Fortunately, the lack of any significant threats allowed Singapore to minimize expenditures on defense and focus on other national interests. His policy of promoting regional cooperation complemented his economic programs by opening

up markets. The net result of this pragmatic approach was that Singapore became an unattractive target to potential aggressors.

## ECONOMIC STRATEGY

After her independence, Singapore's most immediate concerns were economic. Instead of developing a common market with Malaysia as provided in their separation agreement, economic competition between the two countries quickly ensued that resulted in quotas, duties, and retaliatory tariffs.<sup>12</sup> The prospect also existed that Singapore might lose her role as the financial center for the Malay peninsula. To counter these negative developments and enhance economic prosperity, modernization of Singapore's economy became the utmost priority.

In economic matters, Lee relied heavily upon Goh Keng Swee, who served as the country's first finance minister. To Lee and Goh, the supremacy of the state was based on the strength of the economy. They planned to "develop Singapore as a mixed economy, a combination of private enterprise with state encouragement and participation."<sup>13</sup> Recognizing that only the fittest survive in economic competition, their programs were developed so that weak aspects of the economy gave way to its strengths. Consequently, they shifted the economy's focus from agrarian pursuits, which were unable to feed the entire country's population, to the development of the secondary sector -- manufacturing, utilities, and construction -- and the service sector -- transportation, communications, and finance.

In industrializing the country, one of Lee's major goals was to diversify the economy. Specifically, industries needed to be developed to take advantage of Singapore's two primary assets, her people and her location. The Economics Incentive Act of 1967 streamlined existing economic laws and offered financial inducements to encourage the development of export and technology industries.<sup>14</sup> Relying on her affinity to the sea, Lee set out to make Singapore the biggest shipping, ship-repair, and shipbuilding center in Southeast Asia. In 1966, Singapore established her own ship registry and offered the world's most favorable tax structure for registration of foreign ships. Singapore, thus, became the first Asian flag of convenience.<sup>15</sup> From 1966 to 1968, she was able to expand her shipbuilding and repairing business.

from \$64 million to \$120 million <sup>16</sup> By 1969, she had surpassed London as the busiest port in the Commonwealth and soon thereafter became the trans-shipment center for Southeast Asia

A master of turning adversity into advantage, Lee used the announcement of the withdrawal of British forces from Singapore as a tool to draw his people closer together and restructure the economy Lee instituted policies to impose strict labor discipline and to attract domestic and foreign investment His goal was to reduce Singapore's dependence on Great Britain, which accounted for 70 percent of Singapore's investments in 1968 Lee's plan was to attract capital by offering investors political stability and a highly disciplined labor force The Employment Act and the Industrial Relations Act were passed in 1968 to limit labor disputes, prevent strikes, and increase economic output <sup>17</sup> "The laws permitted longer working hours, reduced holidays, restricted overtime and bonus payments and curtailed fringe benefits enjoyed by some white-collar workers" <sup>18</sup> These favorable conditions attracted an influx of foreign capital, particularly from the United States, Western Europe, and other Southeast Asia countries By the early 1970s, the United States accounted for almost half of Singapore's new foreign capital investments and, after Malaysia, became her second largest trading partner <sup>19</sup> In less than four years, Singapore was able to reduce her economic reliance on her former colonizer and dramatically expand her markets

During the first five years of Lee's administration, Singapore had succeeded in diversifying and expanding her economy Her annual gross domestic product rose at a rate of over 9 percent, her annual rate of industrial production increased by more than 20 percent, the number of factories more than tripled, and employment quadrupled. <sup>20</sup> The free reign Lee and Goh had on the economy played a large role in this success They operated with minimal democratic checks and balances Singaporeans fell into the habit of following their energetic and dedicated leadership They quickly responded to new policies and programs which further enhanced Lee's obsession for growth and efficiency His ability to capitalize on success gave him a virtual stranglehold on power and fostered his authoritarianism

## SOCIAL STRATEGY

After her expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore's governmental processes did not need any major overhaul. The republic continued to conduct business openly according to the British parliamentary system from which it was derived. Elections were held at regular intervals based on universal adult suffrage. Although Singapore was not a one-party state, Lee's party, the PAP, won all the seats in parliament in 1965.<sup>21</sup> The lack of any significant political competition gave Lee great latitude in implementing his social engineering policies and permitted him to place individual liberties and concerns below the goal of bringing Singaporeans together as a properly ordered society.

Soon after Singapore's independence, Lee set out to cultivate a sense of a separate nationhood in his people. Since Singapore was a multi-racial and multi-lingual secular society, his goal was to strengthen the nation by drawing them closer together. In a 1965 address to parliament, Lee acknowledged the dangers of division by stating "We have a vested interest in multi-racialism and a secular state, for the antithesis of multi-racialism and the antithesis of secularism holds perils of enormous magnitude."<sup>22</sup> A coherent multi-racial policy was needed to avoid social strife. Equal opportunity in race, color, religion, and language was stressed in public life. By mixing different racial groups in public housing, instituting resettlement schemes, and integrating schools, Lee was able to extend his multi-racial policy into the private lives of his people. These policies had the beneficial effect of reducing multi-racial discord and enhancing friendships and understanding.

According to Lee, Singapore's rise to power was dependent on her inner spirit. In his social strategy, he sought to indoctrinate his people with a sense of solidarity by instilling in them discipline, competition, and desire for worldly success and material gain. In a 1973 New Year message, he highlighted his position by stating

The greatest satisfaction in life comes from achievement. To achieve is to be happy.

Singaporeans must be imbued with this spirit. We must never get into this cycle of expecting

more and more for less and less. Sensual pleasure is ephemeral. Solid satisfaction comes out of



achievement, the overcoming of obstacles which lie in the path of an individual or nation seeking success. It generates inner or spiritual strength, a strength which grows of an inner discipline<sup>23</sup>

Education was a key tool for inculcating such national values. Since universal free primary education was in existence at the time of independence, Lee's government placed emphasis on expanding secondary and tertiary education. Particularly, scientific and technical studies were stressed. Through an intense educational program, he sought to fully develop every child's economically useful capabilities. As an example of his authoritarianism, heavy penalties were imposed on parents who educated their children overseas<sup>24</sup>. Such measures to promote domestic education were aimed at increasing national cohesion, instilling the national ethos, and ensuring that children were trained in the skills and professions the government deemed necessary<sup>25</sup>.

A variety of social programs were implemented to complement Singapore's economic development. As the world's most densely populated country, Singapore had to control the growth of her population. He instituted programs to liberalize abortion and promote free contraception. As an inducement to limit the number of children, penalties were imposed on parents for having large families. Such penalties included disqualification from government housing programs, imposition of increased hospitalization fees, and loss of education priorities for families of four or more children. Immigration laws were strengthened and strictly enforced to protect against an influx of rural immigrants and unskilled laborers. The shortage of land also prompted Lee to institute high-rise public housing projects and resettlement schemes. By transforming decaying districts into modern, high-rise flats, he also furthered the prospects of economic growth by making more land available for industrialization. In these projects, however, little concern was given to the "strain of living in a pigeon-hole inside a beehive"<sup>26</sup>. Eighty percent of Singapore's population now lives in such housing.

Lee's social engineering policies have been the most criticized aspects of his national security strategy. Many of his programs came at the expense of individual liberties. Freedom of expression, for example, was restricted. Newspapers were required to obtain annual licenses and subtle pressure was placed on them to inhibit criticism<sup>27</sup>. The government controlled broadcasting and television stations and "declared its intention to use these means to continue to inculcate national attitudes and political understanding"<sup>28</sup>.

Use of capital punishment was expanded and corporal punishment was authorized for a wide variety of crimes. Lee viewed such restrictions as a mechanism for achieving greater freedom. His goal was to have a "well-ordered society so that everyone can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy."<sup>29</sup> While his social engineering programs worked in Singapore, many other societies, particularly Western democracies, would most likely find them repugnant and repudiate them as excessive and arbitrary infringements on human rights.

## CONCLUSION

Lee shrewdly guided his nation's growth and development. Through a perceptive reading of Singapore's domestic and international environment, he was able to capitalize on Singapore's strengths -- her people and her location -- and take advantage of available opportunities without wasting energy or assets. Most importantly, he succeeded in his ultimate goals of bringing his people together as a viable nation and advancing their economic prosperity.

The lack of any significant physical threats to Singapore's existence was a luxury that allowed Lee to focus on his utmost concern: the economy. His industrialization programs were a well-balanced approach to economic expansion. By achieving economic prosperity, he also furthered his goals of increasing physical security and uniting his people. While some of his social engineering programs resulted in the infringement of individual liberties, he correctly assessed that such costs were acceptable to his people. Overall, his policies and programs were well suited to accomplishing his goals. Through his national security strategy and statecraft, he expanded Singapore's influence in Southeast Asia and elevated her to the status of a regional power.

Singapore's growth and development since her independence has been truly remarkable. This miraculous transformation is a tribute to Lee's intellect, ambition, and leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs* 73 2 (1994): 109.

<sup>2</sup> Zakaria 109.

<sup>3</sup> Zakaria 109.

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- <sup>4</sup> C M Turnbull, A History of Singapore, 1819-199 (Singapore Oxford University Press, 1988) 305
- <sup>5</sup> Turnbull 304
- <sup>6</sup> Turnbull 311
- <sup>7</sup> Turnbull 311
- <sup>8</sup> Turnbull 308
- <sup>9</sup> Turnbull 330
- <sup>10</sup> Zakaria 122
- <sup>11</sup> Zakaria 122
- <sup>12</sup> Turnbull 298
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- <sup>19</sup> Turnbull 310
- <sup>20</sup> Turnbull 309
- <sup>21</sup> Turnbull 300
- <sup>22</sup> Turnbull 300
- <sup>23</sup> James Minchin, No Man is an Island (London Allen & Unwin, 1990) 299
- <sup>24</sup> Turnbull 314
- <sup>25</sup> Turnbull 314
- <sup>26</sup> Minchin 250
- <sup>27</sup> Turnbull 322
- <sup>28</sup> Turnbull 322
- <sup>29</sup> Zakaria 111